

Incunabula and Postincunabula

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THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH to the collecting of incunabula as specimens of early printing is being challenged today by another, more recent approach which places the main emphasis on their intellectual content.

Printing had hardly established itself as a successful trade when controversy began as to its origins, a dispute which is still not completely settled. From this controversy came the interest in the history of printing and the collecting of the earliest products of the printing press in the various cities and countries, a trend which dominated the collection of "early printing" (to adapt the term used in the title of the British Museum catalogs) until very recently.

However, in the past thirty years there has been a continually growing interest in the intellectual content of most early printed books with a consequent loss of interest in them as specimens of printing, except when such books are of outstanding importance in the history of that craft. This new concept is causing a revision in the *terminus postquem* of early printing. The magic date December 31, 1500, has been traditionally considered the end of the incunabula period, a satisfactory terminal date for the technique of early printing. However, when intellectual content is considered, the date 1520 is far more satisfactory as a terminal point as it marks the approximate beginning of the flood of pamphlets around the Reformation movement, causing a revolutionary trend in the manufacture of books and the final breakup of the medieval concept of unity in religion, philosophy, and government.

The approach to incunabula as "specimens of early printing" furnishes a perfectly valid basis for their collecting, as is exemplified by the great collection in the British Museum. One conspicuous result of this approach has been a greater bibliographical knowledge of

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incunabula than of any other field of printing. It has resulted in reference books of great value. It has also resulted in the production of a great many catalogs of the holdings in this field of various libraries all over the world, so that a scholar finds it relatively easy to locate a copy of a book in the incunabula period.

However, collecting by printing specimens has also produced some curious intellectual and economic distortions. To cite an example, one Jacobus de Fivizzano produced in the town of that name four editions of classical authors between 1472 and 1474 of almost legendary scarcity. He then moved to Venice where he apparently became a casualty of the depression in the printing trade of the later 1470's. Of the books which he printed, only one, the *editio princeps* of Michael Scotus, *Liber Physiognomiae*, has any claim to intellectual importance; the rest of his imprints are poorly produced copies of standard classical texts, valuable solely as curiosities. Yet these volumes were and still are very expensive books. While no one will question their rarity, their intellectual value is doubtful. The net result of collecting incunabula in the traditional manner has led to a tremendous volume of knowledge about their appearance and the most minute description of their physical characteristics with a consequent neglect of their content. Also, one might add, many of the scarce printing examples have been swallowed up by permanent collections and thus have become almost unobtainable.

Robert Proctor of the British Museum was probably the greatest exponent of this type of "imprint" collecting, yet in his later years it is obvious that he recognized its limitations; when he began the second part of his *Index to the Early Printed Books in the British Museum* he extended the date for "Early Printed Books" from 1500 to 1520.¹ This was in 1903. Thirty-five years later, Sir Stephen Gaselee in writing the Preface to sections II and III of this work remarked on the continuity of content of the books, saying ". . . I do not discern any great decrease in liturgical books or increase in 'popular' literature. My general conclusion is that Proctor was right (as he usually was) in considering 'early printing' more or less as a unit from the beginning to 1520."² For practical purposes, Proctor's reason for the choice of 1520 as a terminal date is satisfactory, since it stops short of the first great use of the printing press as a means of mass propaganda.

While Proctor in one sense recognized the intellectual unity of the period to 1520, the real direction in the fundamental change in the collecting of incunabula came from the medical profession, some of

whose members became interested in medical history and of necessity its close relation, the history of science. Sir William Osler was one of the earliest exponents of collecting early printing by content and A. C. Klebs was probably its most effective early propagandist, aided by such scholar-booksellers as E. P. Goldschmidt of London and the Rosenthals and Ernest Weil on the Continent.

In 1932 Klebs wrote regarding incunabula of science and medicine that in spite of the scarcity and wide dispersion of incunabula in different corners of the world, "the accumulation of reliable material has augmented to such an extent that the analysis of the contents of these books, and with that the dissemination of ideas during the period under consideration, can now be taken with a fair promise of profit."³ Six years later, he published as an issue of *OSIRIS* his short title list "Incunabula Scientifica et Medica" which firmly established the concept of studying the content of incunabula and thus of collecting them on the basis of content. It was a pioneering work and only began to scratch the surface, as is clear to any one who has had a great deal of contact with early printed books.

A history of printing can be easily demonstrated by the right thirty or forty items and, though this is heresy, quite possibly a more effective demonstration can be made with single leaves than with the complete books. Textually, however, books printed before 1500 give us a vivid representation of the intellectual and political history of mankind from classical times. Intellectually they fall into two classifications, one, contemporary writers who represent their period in exactly the same way that Elizabethan or eighteenth century writers represent theirs; two, older writers, classical Latin authors, church fathers, medieval philosophers, theologians, and scientists, whose first appearances in print preserve for us their knowledge and contributions to literature in a way that the manuscript never could. And the period from 1500 to 1520 marks the culmination of this process in the appearance of the great scholar printers of the Renaissance, Aldus and his rival, the Giunta printing empire, Froben at Basle, and Jodocus Badius and Henricus Stephanus at Paris. By 1520, most of the major Greek authors had appeared in print either in the original or in translation and many important medieval authors had been rescued from oblivion, particularly by French and Rhenish printers.

It so happens that my personal experience as a private collector and as curator of the Yale University Library has coincided with this change in the form of collecting early printed books. In some meas-

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ure it may seem as an illuminating "case history" of this trend and I ask the readers' indulgence in the following autobiographical account.

I have had no formal library training, my Ph.D. was taken in Middle Eastern History. I have learned what little I know of rare books the hard way, and I believe the only effective training to be the handling of many thousands of them, from seventh and eighth century manuscript fragments to first editions of J. P. Marquand.

As an innocent young graduate student I began collecting the Latin author Juvenal, some thirty years ago. I was almost immediately intrigued by the magic date 1500. The descriptions of books dated 1500 or before were accompanied by a string of numbers with cryptic abbreviations such as H. HC. Pr. BMC., etc. and were priced \$75 or more. Those dated 1501 had no mystic numbers, a very brief description and the prices began, to my pleasure, at \$15. Did they look differently when they arrived? No, many of them printed before 1520 did not.

Intrigued by this problem, I obtained a copy of Schweiger's *Handbuch der Classischen Bibliographie* and whiled away some spare time making statistical charts of the printing of many classical authors before 1600, based on where, when, and how often they were printed. The results confirmed the impression of my experience, that 1520, not 1500, marked the break in the pattern of printing not only as to the popularity of authors in specific places but also as to the general format of the books both in design and content, particularly in the popularity of elaborately contrived and intellectually sterile commentaries which often overwhelmed the original text. In effect and quite unknowingly I was doing for classical early printed books what Klebs had done in medicine and science.

When in the summer of 1930 the Yale University Library was moved into the new Sterling Memorial Building, the "Rare Books" consisted of a small group which had been housed in a locked section of stack, and the library as a whole was a good working library for a university of that date with a few excellent special collections. Equaling the importance of the new building was the appointment of Chauncey Brewster Tinker as keeper of rare books, a totally new position. As a great and discriminating collector, he knew and understood the value and scarcity of rare books; as a great scholar, he appreciated their intellectual value; and as a great teacher, he was eminently able to pass on to us his knowledge and enthusiasm. With

my own interest in early editions of the classics it was inevitable that I was drawn to the Rare Book Room and to Professor Tinker.

Our collection of incunabula at this time consisted of almost two hundred volumes, comprising a Gutenberg Bible, a small group of fine books given the library by William Loring Andrews and a miscellaneous hodgepodge acquired by gift or purchased for some specific research problem. It had no coherence, no objective. In 1935, Tinker had the opportunity to acquire the Ionides collection of Greek classics at a ridiculously low figure. It contained some sixty Greek *editiones principes*, nine of which were incunabula. This was not a great number, but it provided a direction which we could follow with our very limited funds: the acquisition of additional Greek incunabula and Latin translations of Greek works, a virtually unknown field of great intellectual importance. Fortunately we had little competition.

I was responsible for the next acquisition, my Juvenal collection, which had outgrown my limited bookshelf space. Including acquisitions resulting from a year in London, it contained about forty incunabula, editions of Juvenal or works containing extensive quotations from him and an equal number of editions printed between 1500 and 1520.

It was after my return from England in 1937 that I first met that great collector and great man Harvey Cushing who had moved to New Haven after his retirement from Harvard. I wish that I had been able to know him better but I was not living in New Haven and had been there only occasionally since 1933 when I had transferred to the Harvard University Graduate School.

Dr. Cushing was filled with his plan to unite his collection with those of J. H. F. Fulton and Klebs to form the Historical Medical Library of the Yale Medical School. This would in effect form one of the great collections of medical incunabula.

My purpose in mentioning these three collections, the Ionides collection of Greek books, my own Juvenal collection, and that of Cushing is not to emphasize the importance or richness of these as collections of incunabula, but rather to show that the incunabula therein were only a part and a small part of three collections which were essentially based on subject matter collected in an historical manner. To use an analogy, they were vertical in scope rather than horizontal as a collection of printing specimens would be.

In 1940, Bernhard Knollenberg, who had recently been appointed librarian, felt that one of the major weaknesses of the library was its

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poor collection of incunabula and tossed the problem to J. T. Babb, D. G. Wing, and myself for specific recommendations. The problem reduced to its simplest was how to come up with a plan of collecting which would provide the greatest gain in an intellectual sense with the frank fact that we had virtually no funds to expend on such a collection. This immediately threw into the discard any ideas of collecting specimens of printing or illustrated books on an extensive scale. These were luxuries only to be indulged in occasionally. Mr. Wing and I both felt that there were many intellectually important incunabula on the market at ridiculously low prices. We further felt that by and large we would obtain a representative collection of printing if we bought by content alone. We frankly acknowledged that this method of collecting would almost entirely eliminate the illustrated book. So we proposed to collect incunabula on the basis of subject only, and with special relationship to strong collections of later periods already existing in the library.

Fortunately for us, chance soon exposed us to one of the pitfalls of collecting incunabula. A series of collections were given to us in rapid succession, each containing one incunabulum. At this stage in our collecting each additional incunabulum seemed to us a pearl of great price. Each one was the same text, Herolt's *Sermones discipuli* of which we already had a copy. Through the generosity of friends we were soon in danger of having the world's finest collection of one of the dullest incunabula. Even today, I shudder when I see a copy of Herolt. But the experience taught us to limit ourselves to but one copy of a text, considering of course each scholarly edition as a separate text. This criterion naturally applied only to our purchases, as we had no desire to control gifts. One other consideration was also added, that there was really no sense in competing with an already established superb collection. Therefore, Savonarola and *Imitatio Christi* were left to Harvard; Vergil, except for representative editions, to Princeton; and Dante and Petrarch, again except for representative editions to support our collections of later editions, to Cornell.

The outbreak of World War II, followed by the entrance of our country into the war, cut us off from our supply of material from abroad with the result that we rapidly developed a surplus of funds. Mr. Babb, then acting librarian, raised the point of the use of these funds, whether to buy books in stock in this country, or to save the money for use after the war. Mr. Wing and myself, knowing the low prices of certain materials particularly the postincunabula and the

later sixteenth century books, recommended buying as much as we could immediately, and an incredible flood of books descended on the Yale Library which was to continue for the next ten years or so.

However, it was not until after the war that the collection of incunabula began to grow by leaps and bounds. Three elements are necessary for any collection: a supply of material, an interest in and knowledge of the field of collecting, and available funds. The Yale Library found in the late Louis M. Rabinowitz a friend who was interested in the Library in general and the incunabula collection in particular. In the ten years before his sudden and untimely death in 1957, he gave the library some 533 incunabula, a large collection in itself. These ranged from the Gutenberg *Catholicon* on vellum and Caxton's *Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*, down to ephemera of considerable historical importance.

As for interest and enthusiasm and knowledge of the field it was up to us to provide it. Interest and enthusiasm we had in great abundance. Knowledge of the field and discrimination grew with experience. (I use the plural "us" not out of modesty but because while I may have started the ball rolling, I received wholehearted support from many others from the librarian on down).

Lastly and most important was the problem of supply. The late rare book dealer Charles Stonehill in 1947 made some extraordinary purchases on the Continent, the largest of which was the stock of manuscripts, incunabula, and early sixteenth century books held by the firm of Jacques Rosenthal in Munich. When the incunabula and manuscripts began to arrive, I would go to Stonehill's shop in New Haven and help his partner Robert Barry unpack them. This might be termed, I guess, getting in on the ground floor. However, when the postincunabula came, a more direct method was adopted: the crates were delivered to the library, unpacked there; and then the volumes we did not want were trucked to Barry's shop. I suppose this might be termed getting in on the sub basement. I have no idea how many sixteenth century books there were but they numbered in the hundreds. (Mr. Barry tells me that we bought about 1500 early sixteenth century books.)

Of course, in handling materials such as this in volume, we had to establish some categories and priorities fitted to the other collections in the Yale Library. This meant that we had to have a good understanding of the content of each book we purchased.

Shortly after this, H. P. Kraus acquired a large group of incunabula

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from the estate of the late Joseph Martini, rare book dealer of Lugano, and we had the opportunity to acquire an important group from this collection. In 1952, when Otto Ranschburg took over the business of the late Lathrop C. Harper, pioneer dealer of incunabula in America, we were able to acquire a group of sixty or so fifteenth century imprints of high quality from his stock at a very favorable price.

While all this was going on, we were not neglecting the "specimens of early printing." Professor Tinker had at his disposal a fund which could be used in part for this purpose, and we were continually adding two or three books a year as opportunity offered.

Meanwhile the Law Library under the direction of Samuel Thorne was building its collection of legal incunabula from one to about one hundred, thanks in large part to a wartime accumulation of unspent funds. The Medical Historical Library was not so fortunate. Starved for funds until the past very few years, few additions were made to the superb collection of medical incunabula bequeathed by Cushing and the small group of volumes left by Klebs. We helped as best we could and the late J. H. F. Fulton gave an occasional volume but his own major interests lay in later and more important fields of medical history. Recently, a realignment of funds has released the Cushing fund for the acquisition of books, and important additions to this collection have been made.

I was called to active duty with Army Intelligence in 1950 and returned after three years in the Pentagon to be a bit overwhelmed by the over-all growth in the Yale Library. In order to find out what had happened to the collection of incunabula, I compiled a handwritten list of our holdings which was then photostated and distributed to the other Yale libraries. While doing this, I noted that there were many books which were represented in the New York-New England area by our copy only. So it was decided to publish a utilitarian little handbook of our holdings for scholarly use.⁴

This pamphlet had scarcely come off the press, when Willy Heilmann of the Stockholm firm of Sandbergs Bokhandel arrived in New Haven. He had come at our invitation on quite another matter: we wished his firm, which deals in new as well as rare books, to act as our Scandinavian agent in the acquisition of newly published material. He had with him a list of the duplicate incunabula in the Munich Staatsbibliothek, numbering some three thousand entries. It was only a list of Hain numbers with the number of duplicate copies. He said that these were only acquirable on an exchange basis and that he

had found a group of incunabula in New York which would provide such a basis of exchange if we were interested. We were, so I undertook the job of translating the three thousand Hain numbers into Stillwell numbers, checking these against our holdings and then choosing titles in which we were interested. These came to about 450. There was, of course, no assurance that these were available. Duplicate copies might be defective or might be bound with other works or might not be available for reasons of provenance. I further supplied him with a copy of my pamphlet and briefed him thoroughly on our principles of collecting and our major fields of interest. The actual choice of the books themselves had to be entirely in his hands. About a year later, the books arrived, about fifty of them, almost all in immaculate condition in their original bindings. If I had chosen them myself I could not have made a better selection.

These events illustrate the high spots of our collecting. There was, of course, a continual flow of individual items from dealers who were familiar with our collection but, surprisingly, we made relatively few purchases from catalogs or at auction although we always carefully checked these sources. My own experience, gained in the Yale Library and by observing the growth of collections elsewhere, is that most important acquisitions come from a good dealer-client relationship rather than through public presentation via catalogs whether regular or auction. These sources are valuable for filling in gaps but most of the important and readily saleable items seldom get as far as a catalog unless the dealer is saving them for a specific project.

I felt that after the acquisition of the incunabula from the Munich duplicates our rate of growth would greatly slow down. According to Wing's count in November, 1956, we had then 2,170 different incunabula, plus about sixty-five duplicates. This collection represented some 1,750 different texts. Language representation was fairly good considering the scarcity of vernacular texts both in proportion to the number of books printed and the scarcity of vernacular books in the current market. The figures were as follows: Italian 80, German 48, Greek 36, Hebrew 33, English 15, French 9, and Spanish and Dutch 4 each. The Greek coverage is remarkable as Proctor in his history of Greek printing lists but sixty-three Greek incunabula of which twenty are elementary grammars and dictionaries representing about four texts.⁵

In various fields of incunabula printing, such as classical authors, church fathers, philosophy and important medieval theology, and of

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course medicine and science, our coverage was excellent. As "specimens of printing" our coverage of early presses was surprisingly good and the serious gaps were few. Our coverage of the history of book illustration was mediocre; a pleasant surprise, for I had anticipated it would be bad. Our collection of traditionally important incunabula ("crown jewels," as Mr. Babb aptly calls them) had become fairly impressive. I anticipated that the future growth of the collection would be very slow, and we instituted a policy of close scrutiny of our purchase of incunabula. Yet in the past three and a half years we have added almost two hundred items, aided by two major gifts numerically rather small, but very important in quality.

Recently a new dimension was added to the collection by the acquisition from H. P. Kraus of two bundles of fragments of incunabula taken from old bindings which came from a European source and contained about fifty unquestioned proof sheets. In addition, we have found eleven pieces of ephemera, two of which were previously undescribed. The digestion of this material is a long process, but a fascinating one.

Aside from the very valuable lesson taught by Herolt's *Sermons*, I have learned a few other useful lessons. If you say "the only known copy," or "one of three known copies," inevitably another one turns up. The magic of scarcity can seemingly be retained only by prefixing the word "apparently" to your statement. Another thing worth remembering is that in spite of an increasing scarcity of old books, many very fine items continue to turn up, books which one is justified in feeling at times are no longer obtainable. Lastly, the success of any good collection, institutional or private, is going to depend on a favorable client-dealer relationship, because it is upon what the dealer can or will supply that the success of the collection rests.

I regret that I have been unable to say more about Yale's collection of postincunabula. These volumes are not segregated but are incorporated in the general collection according to subject.

I have been writing about my experience with one small collection in a great library. The growth of other collections at Yale has been quite as remarkable or more remarkable than that of the early printed book. Yet it seems to me that a collection of this material is an essential foundation for a great library. It is a natural heritage of the great European libraries as are their collections of medieval manuscripts. In this country we have to get them the hard way by collecting.

There remains, I think, one very valid question to be answered.

After such a collection has been made, is it used to any great extent or does it become just a monument, useful for exhibition purposes and that is all? At Yale, in the case of the Historical Medical Library, there is no question but that the aims of Cushing in forming the library have stimulated research in the history of medicine and that the incunabula provide a vital link between that library's excellent collection of medical manuscripts and the later works. In the Main Library, we have observed a steady increase in the use of the early printed books as the collection has grown, probably due to an increased scholarly interest in medieval and Renaissance studies in the past decade. Direct reactions to the collection are very few for, as every librarian knows, the only time a user expresses an opinion is when the library has not got the book he wants. We happen to consider exhibitions an important part of our educational program and in many exhibitions the presence of a few early printed books gives perspective and depth to the display and adds an eye-pleasing touch as well.

Early printed books are still relatively plentiful in the rare book market. And they remain reasonable in price for their intellectual importance except in a few specialized fields. Few libraries are faced with the problem which we had at Yale, to provide a broad general coverage of the first seventy years of printing which would fit the extensive nature of our main collection. Many libraries have collections on various subjects whose intellectual content could be given perspective and depth by the addition of a few pertinent early printed books and for this content should be the prime consideration.

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